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REPUTATION AND POPULARITY

BY BRIAN HOOKER

THE reading public of to-day is a unique and somewhat disquieting experiment. We have willed that everybody shall read; and for the first time in history everybody does read after a fashion. We are very busy putting books into people's hands, in the general faith that something profitable will reach their heads. Journalism and popular fiction are everywhere spreading and satisfying their own demand; free education, of the best that we can hastily purvey, is sown broadcast alike upon every soil; and there are lectures, libraries, and literary organizations miscellaneous without number. Certainly, if there be anything ominous in the trend of our experiment, it is not for want of direction. English is driving Greek and Latin from our schools, and the tasks are set in our own classics; to the growth of the humanities are applied those arts of commercial promotion and publicity in which we naturally excel; nor is our native self-consciousness anywhere more acute than in the ceaseless talk and writing about books. In so far as may be, we suffer no man's reading to go unguided. Yet, with all this, we can pretend no great complacency over the present result. Our readers batten upon continual masses of cheap print, the like of which for bulk and tawdriness was never seen; philistinism is epidemic, and with it that deadlier kindred disease of discussing books unread and feigning unfelt appreciation; and over all the terms and shows of culture hangs an aroma of disregard, the connotation of the lifted nostril. When little boys cock up their noses over Scott and little girls are superior to Dickens, when scholars are afraid to be academic and critics are afraid to be literary, when a classic means a book to be avoided, and our best writers disclaim their art after the manner of Mark Antony, making a boast of crudeness,

something must be rather curiously wrong. Though these be straws, yet they mark the blowing of an ill wind. For it is sound history to remember that all great ages, however illiterate, have held letters in honor: and that the note of reaction against culture has never been anything other than a symptom of decay. Shakespeare's clowns quoted Latin to the comprehension of the groundlings; for a gentleman to do so now must smell of priggishness; and whoso trusts in the modern training in English to fill the room of the dead languages may observe how far the present university graduate falls below his fathers and his British brethren in the mastery of his native tongue. In our new republic of letters, the aristocrats must suffer exile or repudiate their obligation of nobility: and the enforced familiarity with books breeds among the multitude less comprehension than contempt. We are tending, as it seems, toward an equality of cultivation as well from above as from below. Demos, having seduced Athena, thinks the less of her.

Now in this condition it explains nothing to talk easily of commercialism and a material age. Something may indeed be set down to that futile hurry which leaves us neither the repose for thought nor the nervous equilibrium for emotion; but our theater, which (under pretense of being unliterary) is the strongest branch of present literature, has gone far to abolish the superstition of the tired business man. For the rest, the Augustan age was material, the Elizabethan commercial; and it was always characteristic of periods ideally fitted for literature to protest loudly their unfitness, as any one may remind himself by reading a little criticism. Neither can the blame be laid upon the infectious ubiquity of bad writing. That is at worst as much an effect as a cause: we need not be drunkards because there is a saloon around the corner, least of all upon the worst we can buy there. Moreover, there was always, in proportion, plenty of bad writing, especially where good writing best flourished: fertility grows most weeds. One forgets what masses of rubbish were produced by the Elizabethans, or, nearer home, in the flower of the Victorian period. Yet it is worth observing that the trash of the mid-century was in spirit an attempt at literature, whereas our own is in spirit a protest against literature. It is the difference between Lydia Sigourney and Ella Wheeler Wilcox, between G. P. R. James and George Barr McCutcheon: the

old stuff was pompous, maudlin, sentimental; the new swaggers familiarly with a rough-diamond air, ashamed of refinement. Surely there is a symptom here. None the less, it would be false diagnosis merely to scorn the profane vulgar, charging the new majority of raw readers with the decline of the general average. It is true that half-education makes noisy critics of the type least qualified to criticize: that the peasant has better, because more natural, taste than the bourgeois. But then you must be content to begin spoon-making by spoiling horns. Our trouble is that we are spoiling spoons: not that cultivation is now, as always, in the minority, but that the minority is melting away into the general mass. The gulf between the illiterate and the connoisseur is too wide to be bridged in a generation: in so much there is nothing to alarm; and the washed sow may run back to wallow, lamented only by such makers of silk purses as are bereft of their raw material thereby. But the Prodigal's is another story, since he was bred to desire better than husks. It is not that we read rubbish, but that we turn to it away from better reading: distaste for literature, not appetite for journalism: and in especial the spread of this distaste among the very class which has been for all time the inheritor and curator of the classics. These at least might be trustworthy to hold by the best, as they have traditionally done; and for their descent to the popular level there can be but one explanation. Our propaganda of reading must be so mismanaged as to make the worse appear the better.

What is there in the name of classic to conjure up a spirit of aversion? Or, more precisely, how does the fame of a book affect his appreciation who comes to it for the first time? Among the more docile minded its first service is as a substitute for personal opinion, submerging individual judgment. You must pronounce upon the unheralded for yourself; but criticism of the classics comes to you ready made under seal of authority. Here (by the way) is the first reason why our sense of new books is stronger and livelier, more interesting to ourselves: because it is our own. Now this reading by precedent is at best no other than a natural instance of the law of suggestion: you observe in a book, quite honestly, what you expect to observe, and question no further. So for you Shakespeare is infallible; Browning an abstruse and obscure philosopher, careless

of form; Ibsen a corrosive antiseptic; Dickens a comic caricaturist; Shaw and Chesterton a pair of coruscating mountebanks who deem the world well lost for a paradox; Tennyson, Swinburne, and Stevenson unsubstantial stylists; and so following. Reading thus by rote attains much comfortable cultivation. Only it is scarce within human virtue so to do without taking the one step more into deceit; and then you are past praying for. Shakespeare's jests (let us say) appear to you a little vapid, *Evangeline* touches you too sharply for patronizing, you find more dullness than elegance in Addison; but then . . . why burden yourself with heresy? The multitude are probably right, and in any case it is more agreeable to agree. And before you know it you are fairly in the welter of those who appreciate from the teeth outward, whose verdicts bear no relation to their sense. It is all so fatally easy, even to the last contemptible stage of joining in the critical chorus without ever having read the book. What is the use? I have never (as it happens) read anything of Zola; but I know exactly what to say about him. It is in the air, I could not avoid it if I would; I might undertake to talk for an evening with his admirers, and none should unmask me without the rudeness of direct examination. To this disease they are congenitally subject who care to be considered well read: Philistines are immune; but any teacher can tell how it rages among the schools and vitiates all hope of teaching. You cannot educate an echo; and the deepest heresy is that which ultimately conforms. Conventional errors, moreover, increase snowball-like by rolling; for every faint or feigned acquiescence augments the momentum of authority. The original splash of scandal widens around *Madame Bovary* until for every reader it has many judges; but every month launches without a ripple some book more actually shocking. *Gulliver* and *The Arabian Nights* are reputed in terms of juvenile selection. *The Vicar of Wakefield* has of course precisely the same rights of immortality as *Janice Meredith*; but the name of Goldsmith and the approval of Scott have carried it so far unquestioned that no one utters the blasphemy of a challenge.

Truly, it is bad enough to be hypnotized by sound reputation: and worse when, as in these cases, the reputation is at fault. Nor do we realize how common such cases are. The most familiar names fluctuate like the most active securities:

in Goldsmith's time Shakespeare was nobody in particular; and Scott and Dickens, the idols of the last century, are discredited in our own. Fashions in literature change no less than fashions in attire. One must look deeper than the trappings of the hour for the eternal humanity within. Yet we all treat our momentary habit as part of human nature; and to its own seeming every age is a millennium. Any ass may lord it in the lion's skin so long as furs remain in fashion; let the fashion change, and the king of beasts himself shall appear a travesty. It requires a strenuous effort of the imagination to realize that a Galahad upon Broadway might satirize no less justly than a Yankee in the court of Arthur. So before we bury any moribund classics, let us reflect upon their uncanny habit of resurrection, and acknowledge that incredible to-morrow when we shall be ourselves with yesterday's seven thousand years. *Post hoc, ergo melior hoc*, is the everlasting fallacy. Besides, one may always doubt if the book be even presently dead. Reputation at any given time may mean less to the sense of readers than the whim of the critics who have momentarily the louder lungs. I have just said that we despise Victorian romance, and so we do, officially; yet it goes on quietly outselling our best sellers, while the slings and arrows of outrageous realism fly harmless. The Bible, on the other hand, retains supreme repute; though indeed it was never in Christendom so unappreciated as here and now. Fame like wine grows stronger and sounder through age, and one should not hastily accept upon equal valuation the verdict of the ages upon "Antigone" and the verdict of the hour upon "The Playboy of the Western World." Critical commonplaces, moreover, are as likely as other commonplaces to embody only half the truth. Thus Browning and Whitman, instead of being careless of their form, were fiercely careful to make it what it is; thus the great stylists, from Shakespeare to Stevenson, are in truth no emptier of substance than their inferiors in art; thus Chesterton and Shaw are both utterly sincere, and, except for the mannerism of paradox, utterly opposed. Such literary proverbs are as untrustworthy as that bullies are always cowards, or that faint heart never won fair lady. Nor are the judges more infallible than the code. It is the besetting folly of connoisseurs to esteem themselves the people with whom wisdom shall perish: they announce the mode

with the air of discovering a law of nature; as a fashion page may declare, "Women are to have hips this year." They float triumphantly with the tide, prophesying deluge, then the tide turns. "Paradise Lost" came along with the Restoration; and just after Macaulay had explained why there could be no more epics, Robert Browning wrote "The Ring and the Book." So at the present time one must allow for a premium upon all realism, and a discount upon all romance; and at all times for the confident narrowness of the specialist who knows men through contemporary books. You hear of Dickens as a sentimentalist without structure of Ibsen as flawless in technique, the great unmasker of his age. Now Dickens did construct badly in some cases, perfectly in others: *Our Mutual Friend* is perhaps the best-constructed English novel. Ibsen is a technical expert; but the tragedy in "Ghosts" totters upon a crazy trestle of coincidence; and like most professional unmaskers, Ibsen wasted much genius in washing obvious enamel from the countenance of semi-occasional vice. Hedda Gabler is a horrible accident, like hydrophobia. But the vogue is all for the problem play and against the romantic novel; and most critics move in that thin stratum of society where alone such mad dogs as Hedda do now and then occur, and where alone the arabesque personalities of Mantalini and Micawber are made impossible by convention. Let this not be understood as decrying criticism. The critics are the judges, learned in common law, wise codifiers of tradition. We were never more in need of them; but since the most judicial vision has its blind spot, it is unsafe to follow blindly. We must look also for ourselves.

Thus far of reading by rule; but upon more assertive natures the reputation of a book has just the opposite effect: the effect of a challenge. What is this book which I must admire whether I will or no? I do not think much of it. A classic? Then I do not think much of classics. Impatient intelligence like this, immature whether in training or in years, extends far beyond the undergraduate period: it is equally the mind of that whole vast body of the newly lettered, who have advanced so far beyond their fathers as to be quite certain that no possible horizon can transcend their own; the mind also of the specialist in other matters than books, who carries into that province wherein he is still a child the confidence matured within his own. This

type of mind for extent and independence is best worth educating; and it is precisely the type which our education wastes upon silly revolt. Here is to be sought the root of that distaste for literature which is our peculiar trouble. And its seed is first sown in the schools. A certain resistance is inseparable from the mere fact of required reading: the boy who would devour *Ivanhoe* for fun, who would desire it the more if it were forbidden, will shirk preparing six chapters of it for to-morrow's recitation. School-books are for work, others for play; and we have relegated the best of our literature to the former category. Whereas English is unlike other subjects of primary study in this, that the others do not demand to be pursued for pleasure after school is done. You may graduate none the worse for a hatred of geography or mathematics, for you have absorbed perforce as much of them as you are likely to require, and so an end; but your reading can barely have begun in the class-room. In the evasion of this difficulty lay the cleverness of the old Greek and Latin schooling: it taught literature, while it left English literature untainted with drudgery; besides teaching language, which our present method simply fails to do. Moreover, the requirement of English cannot avoid shifting the emphasis from reading to having read. To have gone through a certain set of books is to be prepared for the examination; and there is the beginning of that Philistine attitude which measures culture by the mile-stones instead of by the pleasures of the way. I do not mean to argue against the teaching of English in the schools: only to point out the inherence in it of certain drawbacks whose operation is everywhere obvious. Something must be allowed at best for original human perversity; and under actual conditions these necessary evils are intensified. Bad teaching runs to seed over the glossary and the notes, withering appreciation into analysis, and setting up the College Entrance Board in the seats of the Muses. Bad selection requires books whose merits are invisible to the student. Indeed, our whole presentation of reading to the new public centers upon these two errors: the error of making the classic a task and the error of making it a means to an unworthy end—the text-book and the examination. And the mischief once started finds no lack of food. Illiteracy, exercised by the pedants, returns presently to the sweet and garnished mind, with seven others

worse than himself capering at his heels: journalism fresh every hour, predigested to stay down where the queasy brain rejects all else; popular fiction, most thrill with mildest thought; translations, compendiums, and five-foot bookshelves, modern devices to make you well read without the labor of reading, palms without dust; philistinism chanting its declaration of independence; and, last and vilest, the critical pander to all these, the inverted hypocrite who assumes vulgarity, the mercenary judge who is devil's advocate as well. Let literature appear ever so little bore-some, and these rush to protest the superiority of rubbish; let reading take the least color of a means to an end, and they offer eagerly a host of nostrums all warranted indistinguishable from the genuine and painless to apply. So we have the unhappy classic beset on opposite sides by clever enemies and tactless friends. Reading is at once honored in the breach and discredited in the observance; and the Attic emigrants are received with open arms in Bœotia. Those traditional rivals Highbrow and Lowbrow are secretly playing into each other's hands. For all their parade of enmity, they are not really competitors in the least: they are a conspiracy in restraint of culture.

Reputation then becomes in these two ways a detriment to popularity: if the reader be more complaisant than critical, it leads him to appreciate blindly or to pretend appreciation; if he be more confident than conservative, it arouses prejudice, and leads him to despise all classics together for the sake of the few which he has failed to enjoy. In both cases the radical error is the apotheosis of reputation. You accept a man upon his merits, but a god must be either worshiped or blasphemed. So if the great writers are truly to be valued above the lesser, they must take on flesh and blood, walking the streets among mediocrities that their greater stature may be seen. It sounds paradoxical to say that here and now we are attending far too much to the mere fame of books; yet that is precisely why we do not better appreciate the most famous of them. For the average mind is not obtuse: that is a conceit of the unobservant; but the average mind is extremely lazy, readier to echo a catchword or to loll upon a prejudice than to form a personal decision. So people will pass a critical counterfeit rather than exert themselves to convict the utterer; so they will discard an entire class of books rather than trouble

to analyze their dislike of a single specimen. And the remedy is to set reputation upon its proper footing. A great book means merely a book which very many have enjoyed: it is in no special category; there is no arbitrary alternative to think thus and so of it, or to leave it and its like alone. Its fame is a majority report, nothing more. You must look for yourself how far you agree with the majority; but you need not be afraid of it. If you materially disagree, you must examine for yourself your grounds of disagreement; but you need not conclude that majorities are always wrong. This, which is the natural attitude toward the ordinary reading of the day, is the only rational attitude toward any reading whatsoever. From the most ephemeral skit to the most inspired masterpiece, every book must be judged personally without fear or favor if it is to be judged upon its merit; for its merit is, in the final analysis, merely the extent of that appeal. If we are to gain anything by making everybody read, everybody must read honestly.

And to achieve this better than by the slow attrition of unregulated chance will demand a fundamental change in our presentation of literature to the unlettered. We are at present teaching reputation without teaching criticism; but we must begin by teaching criticism, and let reputation take care of itself. We say in effect: "Here is a classic which you are to admire: as for the stuff you have been reading, that is bad in such and such respects." To which the reader naturally replies: "For the classic I can take your word; but I prefer, so please you, the stuff I have been reading." No one will admire to order; at most some will profess admiration. Nobody can be won away from inferiority by fault-finding; at most, some will imagine that they admire faults. And that imagination is pre-eminently mischievous and absurd. It is as natural for a man to enjoy cheap writing as for a child to enjoy cheap candy: not that clay and anilines are enjoyable, but that sugar is confused with them. And the only way to educate either taste toward the preference of something better is to distinguish the actual ground of present enjoyment. To examine faults at the outset is sheer waste of time; one must first observe those virtues whose absence constitutes the fault; and to this a sincere admiration of some sort is prerequisite. There is no lack of such where everybody has

already read more or less; for the quality of the material matters little. Wherever there is admiration, something is admirable. Popular fiction has at worst an obvious motive, a rapid action, a sharp cleavage of character; journalism is always lucid and emphatic; the most vulgar verse has rhythmic vigor and pungency of phrase. From these even culture may learn something; but even illiteracy can learn nothing from classics read with prejudice because upon compulsion. Explanation of the merits of the *Nick Carter Weekly* and the editorials of Mr. Brisbane may be made the first step toward appreciating the kindred merits of Meredith and Emerson; whereas praising Meredith and Emerson to minds insensible of their excellence leads nowhere. All sound culture must begin with pleasure and proceed through understanding.

All this is not to play Cassandra for a trifle, peevishly prophesying a journey to the dogs. We shall not be damned for a lapse of taste. Greater troubles we have sustained, and may be now sustaining; nor is the analysis of any failing easily made clear without some color of exaggeration. Yet it is not wholly a little matter bounded by narrow confines of merely artistic advancement. I have spoken of literature and the classics; but reading, in the wider general sense, proceeds along the same paths, judged by the same laws, and appreciated by like appetites. He who is impatient of honest fiction will be impatient of honest thought; the man who prefers cheap drama prefers cheap morality; to be content with tawdry music is to be content with crude emotion. And as reading was never so universal as to-day, so there never was a time when the content of the general mind was derived so largely from print. What we are depends closelier than ever before upon what we read; for we have made all the people readers and all governors.

BRIAN HOOKER.